



# Marisa Urrutia Gedney

EDUCATOR. LEADER. MENTOR.

by Mindy Fried, Ph.D. of Arbor Consulting Partners

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Marisa Urrutia Gedney stands in front of a group of twenty ninth-grade students in an Ethnic Studies class at Roosevelt High School, where students are learning about issues of race, culture, class, and power in their Latino neighborhood in East Los Angeles. Their beloved teacher, Jorge Lopez, is out sick for the day unfortunately, and a substitute teacher sits quietly at his desk, leaving Marisa in charge. Normally, she says, the teacher provides a framework in which she presents the writing project of the day. But today, it’s all in the hands of Marisa, the Director of Education at 826LA’s Echo Park location.

Students look up at her expectantly. Today is their second meeting with her, and they are returning to drafts of poems, letters, and personal narratives they’re writing, which 826LA will ultimately publish into a book as part of 826’s many In-School Program publications. Sprinkled throughout the room are eight eager volunteer tutors—trained by Marisa—who will work one-on-one or in small groups with the student writers. In an orientation prior to class, Marisa has walked the tutors through the day’s agenda with them, emphasizing that the book will focus on “three Rs: re-imagination, resilience, and resistance.” These are the themes that are central to this class and school which is located in Boyle Heights, often known for its predominance of gangs and drugs, not published authors.



Marisa Urrutia Gedney, 826LA’s Echo Park Director of Education. Photo credit: Jorge Segura.

As students settle down, Marisa communicates total confidence and ease, eschewing any trepidation she may have had about leading the class. “Today’s goals are to help you to expand your story,” she tells the students. “And we’re going to do that by adding more details; to show not tell.” She provides them an example that captures a kernel of experience many of them share. “If I’m writing a story or a letter,” she says, “and I say, ‘My mom had a hard life and she is resilient,’ what do you know about my mom?”

For a moment, no one speaks as Marisa waits patiently. Then one student offers, “She was your mom,” and another adds, “She had a hard life.” The conversation has started, but Marisa wants more. “Yes,” she says, “but we don’t know what she did or why.” One student says, “She’s a strong woman,” and Marisa replies, “You might assume that, but . . .,” to which another asks, “Why did she have a hard life?” Marisa lights up and says, “Yes! Exactly! You need examples to support what you’re saying.” She tells the students that as they write their stories, they need to think about “why and how,” in order to make their pieces “as strong as they can be.” She reminds them, “It’s exciting to keep writing! Especially this project, because it will translate into a book.” Eyes wide open, her voice exudes enthusiasm, and perhaps projects a



bit of the students' own surprised delight, as she reminds them, "It's kind of hard to believe it will be published, but think about the story you want people to read when they pick up this book."

One girl gingerly asks, "Do you have to use my name in the book?" And one of her classmates replies, "Yeah, because people might laugh..." Marisa knows that the first speaker has written a story about gang violence and her concerns are frighteningly real if one of the characters in her story were to be identified, even unintentionally. But she begins first by addressing typical adolescent anxieties about how students are perceived by their peers. "It's kind of cool to have your name on the page," Marisa tells the student who is worried people may laugh. "When you're in high school, maybe it's a little embarrassing, but later you might say, 'Why didn't I put my name on it?'" Then Marisa turns to the more serious issue at hand. Marisa knows that betraying a gang member's anonymity is serious business. "I had another student who had that same feeling, but the story she was writing was really important." She offers the option to publish the piece under a fictional name and maybe even write it as if it's a letter, as she walks a fine line of encouraging the student to write creatively, while protecting her from potentially dangerous consequences.

Students are then clustered into small groups, as tutors fan out to review their essays. The assignment from last week was to come back to class with editing changes. One boy pulls out a five-page, hand-written story that eloquently explores how gang violence in Boyle Heights is connected to poverty and injustice. Another student has written a carefully crafted essay arguing that impending teacher layoffs will have a terrible effect on student morale and ultimately hurt the quality of education at Roosevelt High. Other stories are less developed. Some students have made minor changes to their stories and are ready to dive in, and some just rustle through their backpacks to find an elusive story that hasn't been touched over the week. But regardless of what students literally bring to the table, no judgment is communicated by Marisa or the tutors. Students all begin to concentrate on writing and re-writing their stories, with the support of one-on-one attention from the volunteer tutors. Marisa reminds students that the goal for the day is to expand their stories. "You don't need to make it longer," she says. "You just need more details, more examples."

## Coming to 826

Marisa first came into contact with 826 Valencia in 2007, when she was working as an AmeriCorps member in a different afterschool program at a middle school in San Francisco. The program Marisa worked for didn't have already existing ways to work with students during the school day, but she knew there were a lot of opportunities to support this high-needs population. With a desire to find other ways to contribute, she did some exploring and discovered that literally upstairs was a writing program run by 826 Valencia. 826 Valencia was the first of what

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has now become a network of writing and tutoring centers around the country, all aimed at inviting creative expression and celebrating student voice with under-resourced students. Marisa got to know the staff and became their unofficial intern, and when her AmeriCorps year was up, 826 Valencia invited her to apply for a position as a Program Assistant. She began by running the school's Writers' Room, and gradually, over time, took on other responsibilities: coordinating volunteer tutors and the workshop program, and leading the Young Authors' Book Project in under-resourced schools in San Francisco.

Reflecting on her early days with 826, Marisa comments, "I was definitely not there during the founding of 826, but my boss did a lot of that work with the co-founders—Nínive Calegari and Dave Eggers—and I still got to see all of it being shaped and figured out." She was able to build upon this groundwork and could see "where 826 is working and where it's not working, what it needs, and how we can make it better." Joel Arquillos, the Executive Director of 826LA and former Director of 826 National, has known Marisa for a long time, back to when they worked together in San Francisco. "There was always something about Marisa that was just great for us, just something about her spirit and her personality. I told her, if you're ever moving back to Los Angeles, let me know, and a few years later she did." In 2010, he offered her a job at 826LA, where she is now the Director of Education at its location in Echo Park.

## Making an impact

Marisa is very familiar with the struggles East LA students deal with. Joel comments that she comes from these communities "so she really connects to the kids in these schools," and she believes that the In-School Program and publishing projects gives them a profound avenue of expression to deal with the tough stuff of their lives. Marisa also serves as a role model to tutors who do the bulk of the one-on-one work with students, but she is anything but hands-off, and works closely with a number of students.



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The student who gingerly expressed concern about her anonymity is a slight girl named Tania. Her story tells about her family hiding under a bed during a gang shootout. She, her mom, and her siblings are scared, as her brother stands at the window. He is one of the shooters, and he exchanges fire with other gang members across the street. Marisa listens. Then without indicating any alarm at the content of the girl’s story, she simply asks, “What is the story you want to tell? Is it about losing people? Is it about your brother? Is it about you?” Marisa understands the complexity of this student’s circumstances. She wants to foster her development as a writer, yet she doesn’t want anything the girl writes about to endanger her. Tania replies, “I want to tell about the people who died.”

Roxana Dueñas is a history teacher at Roosevelt High School who first met Marisa when she came to her class several years ago to prepare students for writing their Advanced Placement U.S. History test. Roxana was impressed. Students did well on the exam as a result of 826’s tutoring support, and later Roxana incorporated a past 826 publication written by Roosevelt students—*La Vida Diferente*—into her own classroom curriculum. This is the first year Roxana’s class has participated in an 826 publication. “Working with 826 gives me courage and confidence,” she notes. “I’m learning a lot; it’s a different framework.” At the same time, she admits that “it’s a lot.” She appreciates the challenge to help her students make connections between their personal stories and history. “This project gives voice to students. Students don’t always know how to put their thoughts and feelings into writing. It is powerful, meaningful, and transformative.” What makes it possible for Roxana to participate in this project is having access to “826’s amazing resources,” including Marisa’s leadership and support, and the tutors who work closely with her students.

## The 826 Personal Statement Program

Another major focus of Marisa’s work is helping high school students write personal statements for their college applications. The Personal Statement Program was developed at 826 Valencia, and Joel, 826LA Executive Director, comments that, “we made it a priority at 826LA, as well.” Over an entire semester, seniors attend sessions where they receive support in writing personal statements. 826LA also offers intensive Personal Statement Weekends in which 200 students work one-on-one with a tutor over a period of four hours. By the end of the day, students have written solid first or final drafts of their college essays. Feedback from student surveys about this intensive program is overwhelmingly positive. Virtually 100% of students report feeling more confident about their personal statements after working with a tutor, and nearly all students report making significant progress and feeling more prepared to apply to college.

Marisa is passionate about this project, which sometimes takes an emotional toll. “Personal statement season is emotionally difficult for me because students are telling us their stories for the first time, stories of abuse or of violence, stories that are personal, private. But often they say, ‘Oh that’s normal; we’re all going through that. Why are we going to talk about that? That’s just our life and the colleges don’t want to hear that.’” 826LA defines its personal statement approach as “empowering students for higher education by helping them craft compelling, self-reflective narratives that provide insight into character and potential for contribution to campus communities.” Marisa comments that “students’ stories that reveal specifics of their lives—with examples that show character, determination, and the point of action they took to make changes in their lives—show colleges how incredible they are.”

According to Kristin Lorey, 826LA’s Director of Programs and one of Marisa’s supervisees, the goal of the program is ultimately to help students write essays that will help them get into college, but it’s much more than that. The process of writing, she says, helps students “heal some part of themselves,” so that by the time students leave 826, it will “carry through wherever they end up going.”

Marisa and her tutors use a series of prompts to help students write their personal statements: What have been the challenges in your life? Who lives at home? What is your relationship like with them? What are your responsibilities at home? What are you most proud of? “These are the stories that colleges need to know about them,” Marisa explains, “to paint that picture of their world.” Students may not have joined as many extracurricular activities, or perhaps their grades weren’t consistently good, says Marisa, “because many students are helping to raise their little



Sylvia Mendez (left), daughter of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez (leaders in Mendez vs. Westminster, which led to the desegregation of California schools) with Marisa Urrutia Gedney and mother, Beverly Gedney (right) at the Olvera Street book release party for the student anthology: *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice*, a collection of personal and historical essays about a legacy of social justice in education. Photo credit: Carol Kearns.



brother or sister or they have jobs to help pay the rent, or had a lot of trauma. They're trying to deal with keeping up their grades [while] juggling a full life of responsibilities and worry outside of school." Personal statements give colleges more insight into the struggles these students deal with on a daily basis and how they navigate their daily lives to thrive and succeed.

Marisa tells her volunteer tutors that while their work is to help students tell their stories for a college essay, it is also about "acknowledging them as a person." She warns tutors that "[you] may want to cry because the stories are sometimes hard to hear and may resonate with your own experiences." "That's okay," she reassures them, but they need to be able to "come back to the situation," and communicate to students a sense that, "Wow, I'm amazed by how you handled something so difficult. That says so much about you. I admire your maturity and strong character. Now let's put that in writing so the colleges can learn more about you."

Two of her Personal Statement students, Ruben and Gelitza, are about to graduate from Roosevelt High School, and both have been admitted into very good four-year colleges. As leaders in their school, they are both Roosevelt High "Student College Ambassadors," the first line of contact for other college-bound seniors before they see one of the school counselors. This involves signing up fellow seniors for 826LA's Personal Statement Program, directing them to SAT prep courses, and working with a caseload of students on their college applications.

For over a year, Marisa has mentored these students, helping them write their personal statements and supporting them in their peer counseling work with other students. Both of them participated in the semester-long personal statement program as well as an intensive Personal Statement Weekend with 826LA. "My personal essay wouldn't be as good without Marisa," says Ruben confidently. "She was a huge part of both of my personal stories."

Ruben's essay begins:

*My mother called me her miracle child, the one who did great in school and stayed away from all that was bad in Boyle Heights, like gang violence and drugs. I was the one who was on the right path of attending college and succeeding. School was easy for me, as I have the support from both my parents and my older siblings who wanted me to do better than they did. Everything fell apart as we found out that my father had committed adultery. Home was just not home anymore.*

Ruben's words flow easily now. "I don't want to be a writer," he notes, "but sometimes I have this feeling, and I write things down. I need to get stuff out."

*My mother decided to kick out my father and she had to pay the rent and bills all on her own. She had to work extra hours, yet there were times that we could not pay the rent and we got close to being evicted. School didn't matter to me anymore and I no longer cared for getting the grades I was accustomed to. I stopped doing homework and I walked the hallways with a fake smile to hide my pain. My mother was in too much pain of her own to realize how bad I was doing, so there was no one there for me at the moment.*

Ruben's essay continues by describing how he turned things around with the help of a teacher. He writes about how he has learned to balance the high expectations from his family with his very real response to his family's dissolution. Ruben may not see himself as a writer, but he has learned that writing helps him process his feelings.

His friend, Gelitza, says she is more resistant to writing because "you have to question yourself so much." But she, too, worked hard with Marisa, who was the first person to read her essay. In the end, Gelitza wrote a powerful essay that captures the struggles in her family, her aspirations for her future, and the pressures from her family to succeed.

*My mother tells me, you are my last hope. However, she cannot tell me how to succeed as neither of my parents were formally educated. I'm the youngest of five siblings. Some of my siblings graduated high school; however, they are all now stuck in minimum wage jobs. My father works in a factory and is undocumented. My mother babysits and makes homemade pastries on her own time to make extra money. As the youngest, I have become the last hope to end the cycle of poverty.*

Gelitza writes that she is motivated to "succeed with education" in order to escape the violence and poverty she sees every day growing up in Boyle Heights, a neighborhood she describes as "populated by the gangs." She says most people don't feel safe in her neighborhood because of all the shootings and constant violence, but she has "learned how to get around my neighborhood by staying on busy streets, although it's never guaranteed that I'm going to be safe." She looks to her older siblings, but is disappointed because she sees that their choices have not allowed them to "escape the constant danger in our neighborhood." When Gelitza started volunteering in pediatrics at a local hospital, she found her sense of purpose when she observed "a high rate of child abuse and mistreatment of foster kids." She writes in her essay:



*It was there that I saw these nurses help those that have been abandoned by everyone else . . . I want to be part of this important service. These experiences motivated me to pursue my dream as a nurse.*

With Marisa's support, Gelitza was able to articulate her hopes for the future in a well-constructed essay that ultimately helped her get into the college of her choice.

## Becoming a leader and mentor

Over the years, Executive Director Joel has seen Marisa grow from an AmeriCorps member to "being a real leader," and admires her ability to manage and mentor other staff. "She's really great at developing talent. She's just somebody who really can help others become better at their jobs." Kristin, who develops programming and designs curriculum for 826LA, concurs with Joel's observation. "Marisa has been my manager ever since she came to 826. She has really encouraged my growth in the past few years. She was the first person who provided me with critical feedback, not just telling me, 'Oh, you're doing a great job' . . . but also telling me how I can improve. It was definitely a learning experience to work with someone in that way. It has enabled me to become a manager myself, and to be able to work with the people that I work with now in the way that I do."



Former 826LA AmeriCorps VISTA member, Ana Tenorio, with a student during a personal statement program at Manual Arts High School.

Marisa also mentors and supervises AmeriCorps VISTA members such as Daisy Sanchez and Ana Tenorio, who ran an 826LA satellite program at Manual Arts High School during their year of service. This 826LA program partners with teachers to support writing projects. For example, one of the school's physics teachers asked students to write about how science relates to their lives, and with support from Daisy and Ana, their stories were incorporated into a book that was then published by 826LA. They would turn to Marisa whenever they had a problem. "She's more experienced and can give us answers whenever we need them. We're the only two people running the site and we're building relationships on the ground with the professors at the University of Southern California, which is just a mile away, and

with the teachers and the administration at Manual Arts." For example, they weren't sure how to respond when one teacher invited 826 volunteer tutors into the classroom to work with students, but continued teaching her own curriculum while the tutors just stood around. "We reached out to Marisa because we don't want to step on any toes." And they were confident that Marisa would graciously help them resolve the situation.

Joel says that Marisa has "the full package." She is a strong manager and a mentor for those who work under her. "She believes in guiding and supporting, and she really gets a very personal connection to those she manages. She cares deeply." Joel also asserts that Marisa is a "model for other staff." It's important for others to see that she has worked her way up in the organization. "I want folks to know you can grow here; you can't immediately jump into this kind of thing. There's a lot to see and a lot to do before you can get to this next stage. She's an example of that for a lot of our staff."

Marisa has also had a fundamental impact on the work of 826LA through her commitment to serving underserved communities. "When Marisa first came to 826LA," comments Kristin, "she encouraged me to go out and have meetings with people and offer our services to the schools serving our target demographic: under-resourced students. I learned to create priorities and goals, and to follow through with them, and to have integrity with what I do and to be proud of what I'm offering to other people."

From the start, Joel's vision was to increase 826LA's support of underserved communities, commenting that staff, volunteer, and intern racial and ethnic diversity is "something we've really committed to, and Marisa has also been a big advocate; she has helped me in the quest to focus our work on serving those communities that need us most." He also wants to have people working at 826LA who represent the communities they serve. "That's a valuable element. And Marisa has been very helpful in making sure that conversation is always strong . . . She brings focus and great questions and good thinking to a lot of our meetings."

Last year, Marisa was awarded a Certificate of Recognition from the City of Los Angeles and Roosevelt High School's College and Career Center, and in particular, Teresa Carreto, the school's Career and College Advisor. Reflecting on how she felt when she received this award, Marisa says:

*"It meant a lot to me because not only do I do a majority of my work at Roosevelt, I put a lot of my heart into Roosevelt. It's rare to work with people that work so hard and care so much and aren't afraid to show their passion. It's an honor to have worked with [Teresa], and it was inspiring to see her working so hard for the kids under hard circumstances and I was proud to be able to support her work."*



As a fellow writer and poet, Marisa writes in her poem, “I Trace Chameleons”:

*When I help 17 year olds tell their story and learn  
what they will leave behind and what might not  
keep living,  
I wonder how they will handle their losses  
and who will trace their pain.*

## PROJECT CREDITS

### **Mindy Fried, Ph.D., Arbor Consulting Partners**

Arbor Consulting Partners was formed in 2002, and its senior social scientists have over twenty years of experience consulting to governments, businesses, universities, and foundations as well as to community-based organizations. They offer superior analytical expertise combined with a firm knowledge base in six principal areas: Community Development, Environment, Public Health, Human Resources, Early Care and Education, and Arts and Arts Education.

### **826LA**

826LA benefits greatly from the cultural and artistic resources in the Los Angeles area. Since opening, they've provided thousands of hours of free one-on-one writing instruction. They've sent volunteers into schools all over Los Angeles, held summer camps for English language learners, given students sportswriting training in the Lakers press room, and published love poems written from the perspective of leopards. In 2013, they launched their first satellite site at Manual Arts Senior High School to expand their reach to students in South Los Angeles.

### **826 National & The 826 National Network**

826 National's seven chapters (located in San Francisco, Ann Arbor/Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, DC) offer a variety of inventive programs that provide under-resourced students, ages 6-18, with opportunities to explore their creativity and improve their writing skills. They also aim to help teachers get their classes excited about writing. Their mission is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success. The 826 National office serves the growing educational network by providing strategic leadership, administration, and other resources to ensure the success of the 826 network.

*826 National contracted Mindy Fried, Ph.D. from Arbor Consulting Partners, to compose the 826 National Network Stories. The goal of the series is to illuminate narratives of a few inspirational, key players across the 826 network who contribute to our mission in different ways.*

